

# HOOKED NOW

DAVE SKIP RICK  
HUGHES-MORRIS-HAFELE

WELCOME to the December-January issue of *HookedNow*.

Feel free to contact us if you have any questions or comments at: [sweltsa@frontier.com](mailto:sweltsa@frontier.com)  
(include "HookedNow" in the subject line for quicker replies).

Where we live the rain has started, and it won't let up for months. Stream flows go up and down with each passing storm, staying up more than down. Even with these conditions we can still fish, and sometimes even catch fish, but to be honest it's a time when it seems more reasonable to focus on tying flies and going through our equipment. One piece of equipment that's interesting to consider is your rods. Which ones did you use the most this past season, or not at all, and why? Do you need a different rod to better address your fishing interests? With that in mind in this issue the three of us talk about rods; how they are designed, what we use, and what to look for in a rod.

More than ever - HAPPY CASTS!

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Rick Hafele - *My Favorite Rods - And Not so Favorite*

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Photo by Rick Hafele



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# HUGHES-MORRIS-HAFELE

## SKIP MORRIS – SOUL OF A FLY ROD

*(All photos by Skip Morris except where noted)*

Photo by Carol Ann Morris



A mysterious tool, a fly rod, not only to the average fly fisher but to the full-time rod-designer as well--I should know, I spent ten years designing rods. Part of the mystery lies in the lack of standardization for fly-rod terminology. What is a “fast” rod? Is it simply a stiff rod? Or is it a rod that bends a certain way when cast? What is “tracking” in terms of rod performance? What is “feel?”

The questions continue beyond terminology. How do manufacturers vary the way a rod bends and performs? What line weight is right for a particular rod--especially one that lists two line weights in its specs?

Good questions all, and these are but a few among the many that occur to fly fishers while casting, playing fish, or rod shopping. My job here: answer the most important, most interesting, and most common questions about fly-rod design. I’ll start with a disclaimer: I can speak only from my own experience, and some of what I tell you will be educated guesses--but a decade of long hours of designing, testing, and making fly rods is considerable experience, and packs a lot of perspective to inform those guesses.

### MECHANICS

To understand rod design--and a whole lot of other fly-rod aspects--you need to understand how rods are made. The performance of a fly rod really boils down to the design of its shafts, or “blank”--the true soul of a fly rod--and that design is executed through the construction process. That process begins with selection of the tapered steel mandrel around which the hollow shafts will be formed. Mandrels vary greatly. You can find all sorts of tapers, and even a remarkably slight difference from one taper to the next--with all other factors constant--can make a big difference in the way the resulting rod-shaft flexes and feels and performs. So, as a rod-designer, you begin by selecting a promising mandrel for the rod you have in mind. Then you must choose the section of the mandrel you’ll use; again, that can be a big deal--move up or down the mandrel an inch and you may turn a tip-section for a four-weight line into a very different tip for a five-weight. And then there’s the pattern you cut from the graphite sheeting (“carbon fiber” is the current hot term for graphite, but forgive my old habits: I still call it graphite). The shape of the pattern determines wall thickness throughout the tubular shaft you’ll create.



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Once you've got all that figured out, you use a machine to roll the graphite sheeting tightly around the mandrel, another machine to wrap the whole thing tightly with shrink tape, you bake it all in a tall oven to make the resins within the sheeting flow and then harden, and then use yet another machine to pop the new rod-section off the mandrel.

Then you go out and test the butt and tip sections by attaching guides and grip and reel-seat and reel and, far more often than not, discover you created a turkey, that is, a lousy set of rod-shafts. So you design another set, and another, and on and on until you actually get what you're after. That can take a long time and a lot of graphite shafts.

So in your role of rod-designer, you face two primary variables: diameter and wall thickness. You control these by the taper of the mandrel (and the part of the mandrel) you select and the cutting-pattern you use for the graphite sheeting, just as I described. Note that I didn't mention the graphite itself. The modulus of graphite varies, and the obvious goal is to develop ever-stiffer, ever-lighter generations of graphite to make ever-lighter rods. But experience tells me that design trumps material every time--a lousy rod is a lousy rod no matter what strain of graphite it carries, and it's far easier to design a lousy fly rod than a good one.



*Two raw sections of graphite rod-shaft--so what? Take a closer look. The shaft on the left is smaller in diameter than the one on the right. This alone would suggest that the shaft on the right is the stiffer of the two--the larger the diameter of a tubular rod-shaft, the more rigid it becomes, even if the amount of material remains constant.*

*However, the walls of the rod-shaft on the left are thicker than the walls of the rod-shaft on the right. The thicker the walls, the stiffer the shaft. So, taking into account both diameter and wall thickness, these two shafts could be of one rigidity. However, they'll be very different in feel, and in how they cast and fish.*

## ROD ACTION

The language for describing fly-rod action has been tossed around more than a five-weight line. I got my definitions from legendary rod-designer Russ Peak, who for decades created rods designed to suit each of his clients. Here's the way Russ saw rod action, but in my words:

A "fast action" rod does most of its flexing in its upper third; the remaining lower two-thirds of the rod feeling pretty unyielding, which, in fact, they are. A fast rod jumps to action--the delay from casting stroke to line response is barely noticeable. A fast rod tends to throw narrow casting-loops in fly line.



*The rod-shaft on top is unfinished, displaying the ridges created by the overlapping turns of shrink tape. Once it's sanded and coated with finish, it will look like the smooth rod-section below it.*

A true "slow action" rod--the opposite of a fast-action rod--flexes right down to the grip, perhaps even into the grip. Most of the flexing goes on in the upper, finer part of the rod--as with *all* fly rods--but the lower half contributes a lot. A slow rod seems to resist a casting stroke, gradually catching up, the weight of the rod-shafts lingering against the hand, and tends to throw a wide loop in the line.

A "moderate action" rod lies between the extremes of fast and slow--it will feel more yielding than a fast rod but quicker to respond than a slow rod, and will naturally throw loops of middling width.

For distance casting, the fast rod makes the most sense. For fishing close-in or with nymph rigs that might tangle with the snap at the end of a tight loop, the slow rod is the logical choice. But personally, I find it hard to beat moderate-action for the range of demands a day's fishing imposes on a rod.

Keep in mind that despite the validity of all the points I've made, they are oversimplified here--*way* oversimplified. For example, a versatile caster can make wide loops with a fast rod and tight loops with a slow rod. Besides, "fast," "slow," and "moderate" are the broadest of terms; consider that rods falling into the category of "slow" can differ as much as a spare and diminutive Olive Midge differs from a hulking Club Sandwich Hopper--they're both, after all, dry flies, right? Well, two rods, both for six-weight lines, might seem worlds apart when you cast them--one feeling heavy and



really flexing under the weight of the line, the other much lighter and stiffer--yet both suit the category of slow-action. So don't cast or fish one slow rod and then declare them all wrong for your tastes and your fishing; another very different slow rod might be your ideal match. The character of each rod design--its soul, really--is unique. I mean, how do you break down a soul into some formula?

And when it comes to selecting rods, never let your intellect serve as your only guide--mainly, trust your gut. A slow-rod lover can throw long lines with tight loops happily all day, just as a fast-rod lover can throw weighted nymphs and split shot and a strike indicator with consistently wide but efficient loops. Cast a rod, consider the duties you'll require of it, and then let common sense and your feelings decide whether you should buy that rod or not. And if a rod feels right to you and you also sense that it will cover the requirements of the fishing you intend for it (casting distance, fly size, fish size...), don't let me or anybody else tell you it's wrong.

## POWER

Even taking into account the broad range that design, action, and performance cover, none of this deals with power. "Power," to me, is about how stiff a rod both feels and in fact is with a given line. This causes a lot of confusion. Take a fast-action rod designed to handle a 4-weight line and put a 6-weight line on it. This will overload the rod, and the caster may declare that rod to have slow action. But it doesn't--the rod still bends as a fast-action rod bends, responds as a fast-action rod responds, and still *is* a fast-action rod; it's just overpowered by too much weight in the line. Just imagine what that 4-weight rod laboring under a 6-weight line would feel like if it had *slow* action. Take the opposite: a slow 6-weight rod with a 4-line--the caster may declare this a fast rod. But in either case, the action hasn't changed just because the line is too light or too heavy.

Put another way, a rod with too heavy a line--regardless of its action--is low in power *for that line*. A rod with too light a line is high in power, again, for that line. So, a rod's power is relative; it's gauged against the weight of the line it carries.

This relativity makes life difficult for rod companies. A rod may be sweet with the light weight of 10 feet of line out, but a rubbery failure with the much greater mass of 80 feet of line off the tip. So your rod shopper comes along--is he or she going to be casting 10



*A versatile moderate-action fly rod can handle an impressive range of fly sizes and fishing conditions.*

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feet of line or 80? No one at the rod company can possibly know, of course. So they guess. And that usually works out well. But if you're a 10-foot caster or an 80-foot line caster most of the time (which is extreme at both ends, but you get the idea), you'd better take some responsibility in matching line to rod.

Even if the rod company says your rod matches a six-weight line, try a five-weight if the rod feels too lazy with a six. Remember the dilemma rod companies face when you go rod shopping, factor in your personal tastes and fishing requirements, and then, once again, trust your gut. And experiment with various lines. If you shop at fly shops, they'll normally let you cast any rod you're considering buying.

Here's a good way to keep action and power straight in your mind: action is about the *way* a rod bends during a cast, where the flexing is concentrated or if it's concentrated at all, rather than spread throughout the rod's length; while power is about *how much* a rod bends when it's cast with a particular weight of line. More simply put: action is *how* a rod bends and power is about *how much* a rod bends.

Photo by Carol Ann Morris



[To watch a video of Skip explaining rod action CLICK HERE.](#)

*A well-designed fly rod should allow a good caster to throw a smooth, graceful loop down the line. But no fly rod can throw a good loop when cast poorly*

## MISCELLANEOUS

"Tracking" is a term that popped up a decade or two (or three?) ago to describe how closely a rod's tip follows an imaginary straight line as the rod is cast. Tracking counts--although the action of the caster probably counts for much more. There are all sorts of theories about tracking. To me it boils down to mounting the guides properly. A rod-section's "spine" is simply the side of the section that bends most easily, it's most flexible side. If you put the guides along that side, the rod will want to push the line smoothly on a forward cast. On the back-cast the line trails the rod, lying against the guides but away from the rod's surface, so the spine becomes irrelevant. But if the guides

end up anywhere near the stiff side of the section, the rod will tend to buck, side to side, on a forward cast. So in a nutshell, tracking, to me anyway, is all about finding the spine and aligning the guides with it.

I judge the fittings on a fly rod by three criteria: 1. function, 2. quality, and 3. personal taste. Function, to me, is about the parts all doing their jobs effectively. A reel-seat that holds a reel loosely or won't even fit most reels, fails. Guides on a seven-weight rod that are too small for a seven-weight line fail, as do guides too large and heavy for another rod's three-weight line. In my experience, a lot of grips, in a variety of shapes, can do a fine job for most casters. Still, a grip too short or slim for a heavy duty rod is a problem; and a big, thick grip on a light four-weight rod is just clumsy--fortunately, you won't run into such rod-grip



*Pretty reel, pretty reel-seat--but they'd better fit and lock together soundly so that you don't need to keep constantly retightening the seat for fear of losing the reel. The combination pictured here is rock-solid.*

issues often. Still, worth noting.

Quality is relative and somewhat subjective. But a flimsy, stamped-out metal reel-seat is probably unreliable, and cheap-looking stripper guides may fall apart on the stream. Quality, in the sense of fine machining and elegance, counts, but mostly for aesthetics--the real issue is whether a fly rod's components will do their work well and do it for many years. Fairly plain components can be solid and efficient.

Personal taste? Well...that's personal. Whatever shape of grip, style of reel-seat, or thread and rod-shaft color you like, you like, and no one can tell you you're wrong.

The cost of a serviceable fly rod with good performance strikes me as more than reasonable today--you can buy such a rod, even in four convenient sections, with a bag and case, for not much over \$150.00. A decade or two ago a few companies set out to make rods of solid quality at comfortable prices, and that gradually changed the whole scene. The way things were going twenty years ago, I would then have expected a just good graphite rod to run \$400 by now.

So, with rods being this affordable, you may feel the urge to charge out and pick out a couple of new ones. If you do, perhaps the ideas I've provided above will help you choose wisely. Hope so.



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## RICK HAFELE – MY FAVORITE RODS & NOT SO FAVORITE

(All photos by Rick Hafele except where noted)

Photo by Dave Hughes



I find the whole concept of fly rods fascinating. Like other great inventions, their form and materials perfectly fit their desired function; to propel through the air a long length of line heavy enough to carry forward a hook covered with fur and feathers. What a bizarre idea. And even more amazing is that according to historical evidence the perfection of this concept, leading up to today's high tech carbon fiber marvels, has been ongoing for over a thousand years<sup>1</sup>. Over this extensive history the fly rod seems to have gone through as much, if not more, experimentation and refinement as airplanes have from the Wright Brothers to the Space Shuttle.

My own experimentation with fly rods has been much less extensive and has occurred over a much shorter period of time - just shy of fifty years as of this writing - but even that brief period has seen some amazing changes. My personal fly rod experiment started with a Shakespeare fiberglass rod I purchased when I was 10 years old. I don't remember the length of that rod, maybe eight feet, but I do remember that the butt section was very stiff, while the tip section was soft and whippy. There were no fly shops anywhere near the small Illinois farm town where I grew up, and I had to convince my dad to drive thirty miles to the nearest sporting goods store that even carried a couple of fly rods. To this day I can remember asking the sales clerk where the fly rods were and was pointed to a small rack where three fly rods hid among several dozen casting rods for bass and walleye. I think it cost twenty dollars. It was not a great rod, or even a good rod, in fact it was pretty damn bad, but I thought it was fantastic and used it for a half dozen years, just long enough



*Carbon fiber fabric, in other words, the stuff that makes space-age graphite rods.*

<sup>1</sup> For a fascinating discussion of the history of fly rods and their design, see *Trout - Vol. 2*, pages 914-1148, by Earnest Schwiebert.

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to figure out that part of my casting problem was the rod (at least that's my story and I'm sticking to it).

My next rods were also fiberglass, as the only real option was bamboo, and I didn't have the money, nor had I ever seen one, let alone cast one. The Shakespeare was followed by a Heddon, which was followed by a Phillipson Epoxite. I bought the Phillipson at Patricks Fly Shop in Seattle while attending college in Bellingham. It was my first truly well designed fly rod. It is an 8-foot, 6-weight, and I say "is," because I still have that rod and on occasion bring it out to fish with<sup>2</sup>.



*My Phillipson Epoxite rod still fishes well today. If you have never cast a fiberglass rod, you should give one a try.*

A well designed rod of fiberglass makes a fine fly rod. The action of a fast fiberglass rod is slow in comparison to even the slowest graphite rods of today, but generally faster than bamboo rods. A good one has a smooth lovely feel that can handle short to long casts with grace. In the 1960's and 70's Fenwick fiberglass rods dominated the fly rod market and I have owned several of them. The Phillipson, however, is still my favorite from that era.

I'm not a rod collector, nor do I consider myself a "gearhead," so I only own a couple bamboo rods. I say only, because many fly fishers I know who have been serious about fly fishing for as long as I have typically own four or five, and often many more, bamboo rods. Of the two I own one in particular stands out for both its quality and where it came from. It is a 7-foot, 4-weight, Granger Victory. It's light and quick and is a delight to fish, especially on small streams where it's length, action, and beauty seem to blend perfectly with the surroundings. There's also something special about the connection it communicates when even a small wild trout dances on the end of it that I've never felt with another rod.

I'm quite surprised that Mr. Hughes (aka. Dave Hughes) didn't mention this rod in his small stream rod article in this issue. You see this rod has been a point of contention

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<sup>2</sup> Out of curiosity I checked the internet for Phillipson Epoxite fly rods and discovered used ones are available and being sold on E-bay. Ah, the amazing world of the internet.

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between us since 1978. That's when Dave gave me the Granger as a graduation present when I finished my graduate degree in aquatic entomology from Oregon State University. It was a most generous present for which I have been forever grateful, and one that Dave has never let me forget! Occasionally Dave and I head up to some small stream in the Oregon Coast Range. When we do I always bring the Granger. After an hour or two of being reminded by Dave what a mistake he made giving me that rod, I relent and let him fish with it. But that only seems to increase his remorse, so after 20 or 30 minutes I force it out of his hands to save him further pain. Fine fly rods are like that<sup>3</sup>.

*This Granger Victory bamboo rod has a long and interesting history, and which I hope will continue to make history for many more years to come.*



Clearly we now live in the age of graphite, and boron, or a combination of the two. The modern fly rod is a very refined instrument that performs extremely well. They are also very different from any previous fly rod ever made. Their light weight has pretty much eliminated casting fatigue, and their power and sensitivity produces exceptional distance and control. It doesn't take many casts with a graphite rod side by side with a fiberglass or bamboo rod for the same line weight to realize their pluses. But in my opinion they also have some minuses.

The biggest minus to me has more to do with rod companies than graphite rods. It's the ever increasing designs for faster and faster rods. Perhaps it's because I learned to cast with slow rods made of fiberglass, but I find some of the newest high-end fast graphite rods completely ruin the pleasure of casting. If you want to cast 80+ feet into the wind then maybe they are the answer. But if you want to actually "fish" with casts in the 20 to 40 foot range, the range where 90% of my trout fishing takes place, forget it, they are just too stiff to provide any kind of feel or sense of connection.

Don't get me wrong, the rods I fish with 95% of the time are graphite, and I enjoy using them. But they aren't the super fast graphite rods so common in fly shops today. I

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<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that two of my favorite rods, my Phillipson Epoxite and my Granger Victory, might have both been made by the same rod builder/designer, Bill Phillipson. Bill Phillipson made bamboo rods and managed rod production for the Granger company before starting his own company where he made both bamboo and fiberglass rods and developed his innovative epoxite construction method for his line of Phillipson Epoxite rods.



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Photo by Dave Hughes



*The even bend right down to the rod handle on this graphite rod shows that it is a rod designed with a slower rod action. Relatively slow graphite rods do exist, but you have to look for them.*

After thinking about it, perhaps a useful analogy for comparing bamboo to fiberglass to graphite is like the difference between a well designed wooden boat versus a fiberglass or metal boat. A wood boat has a warm, organic-like responsiveness in the water, while a fiberglass or metal boat can handle well, but don't have the same touch or feel in the water if you will. On the other hand a wood boat requires lots of care and maintenance not necessary for boats made of fiberglass or metal. In the same way a bamboo rod feels almost alive in your hands, but like a wooden boat it requires much more attention and care than a fiberglass or graphite rod. So I would suggest if you have never cast a bamboo or fiberglass rod, to track some down and try them. You may not like them better than your graphite rod, and

have a couple old graphite rods I still frequently use, especially for nymph fishing. One is nine feet long for a 6-weight line, with a definite slow action by today's standards. For me it is just right for easily throwing more open loops when fishing multiple nymphs, and it roll casts with ease. The other is 8 1/2 feet for a 5-weight line. It's a bit faster but still slow compared to most modern graphite rods. I have used this rod to throw hoppers along the bank, drift midges in flats, and swing caddis pupae and wet flies across riffles. It seems to cover all these needs without a hitch. I also have some new graphite rods designed by builders who aren't searching for the next fastest rod, but design rods that provide feel along with power and accuracy. These rods are also a joy to fish.



*Here's a rack of metal mandrils used to form graphite rod blanks. This is where the design of the fly rod starts.*

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you won't likely convert to bamboo or fiberglass, but you will come away with an appreciation for the range of qualities fly rods possess that you can't understand if all you've ever cast is graphite.



*Three generations of fly rod material - bamboo, fiberglass, and graphite. Each one creates its own brand of magic when skillfully used.*

If you are searching for a new rod my advice is to ask a knowledgeable fly shop owner to let you try a few rods that cover the range from slow to fast (slow by graphite standards that is), and see what you think. If you haven't been fly fishing for long it's quite possible you have never cast a slow rod.

In the end fly rods are a bit like the magician's wand. With a few simple waves in the air they transform a bit of plastic line, monofilament, and metal covered with feathers into something alive, alive enough to convince a fish it is really food. If that isn't magic I don't know what is.



**[To see how graphite rods are made by a custom rod builder CLICK HERE.](#)**

*Catching fish is the ultimate goal of any rod, and really most any rod can accomplish that goal. However, the ease and comfort with which they accomplish it varies widely.*



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## DAVE HUGHES – SMALL STREAM RODS

*(All photos by Dave Hughes except where noted)*



*Photo by Rick Hafele*

Having fished small streams in the four corners of this continent, and on a few others, I'm now convinced that there is no such thing as the perfect small stream fly rod. As we used to say in the infantry, "It depends on the situation." We were not usually talking about fly rods. The rod you want depends on the small stream you're fishing, and perhaps more important, the shape of the vegetation that surrounds that stream.

However, there are perfect small stream fly rods for the variety of situations you might find when fishing them. Since it's not often an accident that we find ourselves fishing the streams that we do, it's often possible to apply some foresight to some hindsight and select the right rod before you go out and hit the water.

Hindsight looks like this: If the most common obstructions to casting on the streams you prefer to fish are overhead, in the form of overhanging trees, limbs, and branches, then a shorter rod will keep your casting arc below them; if the most common disturbances to your casting rhythm are shrubs and grasses that grow up from the stream banks, and the airspace is mostly clear overhead, then a longer rod will loft your fore- and backcasts above them; if the encroachments come from all directions, then again, shorter is better, if for no other reason because it lets you navigate more gracefully from one pool to the next through the surrounding tangles.

I grew up fishing rainforest streams on the coast of Oregon, not far from where the Columbia River enters the Pacific Ocean. Winter spates in that lush but over-soaked

*Rod length is best based on the openness or tightness of the overhead canopy, rather than the size of the stream on which you find yourself. This one is in the Andes Mountains in Chile, and a 9-foot rod is more suitable to the fishing than one a couple of feet shorter.*





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region drive bank-side brush back a bit, and they're fairly clear when I fish there in summer. On a mature northwest stream, one which hasn't been logged in fifty or sixty years, the corridor you fish will be somewhat free from shrubs and tall grass and tag alders; they've all been beaten down or uprooted and carried off by winter storms. But the same corridor will be lined with old alder trees on each side. Their white-barked trunks tilt a bit toward the water; their crowns of limbs and leaves link overhead. In *An Angler's Astoria*, which Stackpole books is graciously just about to re-release after thirty years out of print, I described these alders as looking like rows of square dancers, hands joined high overhead, forming tunnels through which the angler and the stream do their dance.

But those rows of alders are far from tidy. Limbs hang down, snare errant flies. Trees step out of line and get in the way of your casts. Some alders topple, and their upthrust root wads protect the hidden lies of the nicest trout. On such streams, a short rod is your best bet, because it lowers your loop a couple of feet. If that rod is somewhat brisk in action, and lets you cast a tight loop, it reduces the peak height of your line a foot or two more. All this drop in altitude lets you keep your casts beneath the trees.

I've tried rods as short as six feet, and have no complaints against them, except that it's almost impossible to find brisk, bossy blanks at those lengths. Most are noodles, and



*A northwest trout stream with those rows of leaning alders, and the limbs that they often drape over pools. Though this is far from a crowded situation, on the average part of this stream, a 7-foot rod will get you into far less trouble than a 9-footer, which in places would be almost impossible to fish.*



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I'll declare here that the worst kind of rod you can take to a small stream is a soft noodle that does not allow casting a tight loop, and is also averse to accurate placement of flies into tight spots. I specifically like seven-foot, 3- or 4-weight rods for small-stream fishing in tight circumstances. I don't like stiff pool cues, the kind made for distance casting by a surprising number of manufacturers today...though it's no secret that you can almost always over-line such rods a line-weight or two and calm them down. But that leaves them deficient in tip sensitivity, which is necessary for control of your casts. In the old days, the perfect rod would have been described as having a 'dry-fly action'. That would mean it was stiff in the butt for punch, but light in the tip for sensitivity. A famous rod builder who long ago designed my favorite small-stream fly rod--Skip Morris, whoever he is--came up with a system for describing fly rod action. Under his nomenclature, the rod I find perfect is designated simply as being 'stiff-butted, soft-tipped', which implies power at one end and delicateness at the other.

That perfect rod, which Skip quite appropriately named the Dave Hughes Small Stream Special, is seven feet long and casts a 4-weight line. Why do I prefer 3- and 4-weights over the oft-described perfect small stream 1- and 2-weights? First, because most rods for those lighter lines are back to being noodles. Second, because most small-stream dry flies are size 12 and 14 and somewhat brushy: Elk Hairs, Royal Wulffs, Humpies and things of that substantial sort. It takes a bit of line weight to propel them briskly, turn them over tightly, and deliver them right to where you want them. Again, let me express my distaste for light noodle rods on small streams defined by tight casting circumstances,



*Carol Morris slipping along one of the more open parts of a Montana trout stream that is suited perfectly, in most of its more crowded sections, to the Skip Morris Small Stream Special with which she is fishing.*



*Carol Morris with a small-stream trout extracted from a Montana trout stream while fishing with Dave's Skip Morris Small Stream Special.*



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and also for the pool cues and fireplace pokers you run into so often in this distance-casting age. It's almost always necessary to need accuracy when fishing small streams; it's vanishingly rare to need distance.



*Streams in the Blue Mountains of the southeastern states can get a lot more hemmed-in with laurel than this, and you'll be glad to fish them with short rods as opposed to long ones.*

On a diagonal across the country from the wet northwest, the laurel-crowded streams of the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Carolina present some of the most confined, but also most beautiful, small-stream fishing I've ever enjoyed. The brush is not beat back by winter spates in those southeastern regions that I've fished. A nine-foot rod, on the smallest and prettiest of them, will go side-to-side and hit vegetation on both ends. Your fishing experience with a long rod will be limited to dapping in many pools; your casting will be restricted almost everywhere. You'll want your seven-footer, or at most, a rod seven-and-a-half feet long. This

might be the place for those six-footers, if we can get Skip to design brisk but tippy ones.

I'm not saying that all southeast small streams are so encroached. Where they're open, a longer rod will serve you as well as it will on a medium trout stream or large river. But I will say that I've only found more restricted circumstances in one place in the world, on the lenga-choked streams in Patagonian Chile. On streams where the vegetation creeps so near the water, I want the shortest rod I can get.

I know about the theory to use a nine-foot or even longer rod on such tight water, so you can dap more efficiently, use bow-and-arrow casts, reach out farther without casting. But I have to confess a personality problem that prevents me

*On small Pennsylvania limestone streams, you'll find few obstructions to your casting, and will be better served by your 9-foot 3- or 4-weight presentation rod than you will the more standard 7-foot 3- or 4-weight small stream fly rod.*





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from enjoying that as much as you might: I have a disorder in which I consider the act of casting not only part of the description of fly fishing, but also one of the most enjoyable acts, when done gracefully, that can be enjoyed while...on a stream.

Up in the northeast of the country I've done most of my fishing in Pennsylvania, and a lot of that on the beautiful limestoneers that are the roots of so much of our fly fishing and fly tying heritage. On these beautiful pastorals, obstructions of any kind are fairly scarce. They're clearly the place for the long and graceful rod. You'll also quite often be using small flies, to match small insects or crustaceans, so that long rod can be as delicate as you like. In truth, on these beautiful spring streams, you'll be well-served by the same rods you would use on the surrounding medium streams and larger rivers.

The same northeastern states have more than a fair share of small streams that are surrounded by hardwood forests, which grow quite tight to the water, and in most places

I've fished, are blown out less often by winter spates. So the watercourses are actually more restricted than those in the lush northwest rainforest where I grew up. You'd want the same rods here you would on my home waters, or in the laurel-streams of the southeast: a seven-foot rod, balanced to a 3- or 4-weight line, with a brisk action to deliver flies with tight loops to small targets.



*Typical northeast small streams offer the full complement of encroachments from leaning trees, protective shrubs, and anything else that might make you desire your short rod, though on an open pool like this one, the long rod will do as well.*

The southwest streams I've fished, in California, Utah and New Mexico, vary from open pastorals, where you would be glad to have your delicate 9-foot presentation rod, to choked-in Sierra and Rocky Mountain

streams that request the same short rods I use almost everywhere else. I once filled in as speaker on an emergency basis for a club that has a fairly generous entertainment budget--the scheduled speaker spaced and didn't show up. When it was over, the club president asked me what I wanted for a fee. It didn't seem right to ask for money, so I told him I'd always wanted a Skip Morris Small Stream Special in 4-piece.

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He arranged it. Skip supplied the blank; a club member furnished it with reel seat and guides, wrapped it...though I must admit he was a bamboo builder and he didn't like working with graphite, so the rod is not the most handsome I've ever fished. However, it takes up no room in a rod tube; I just slide it in with whatever other rods I might be taking on a trip. As a consequence, I've fished this brisk little thing on more widespread small waters than I have any other, including many streams in the southwest.

I remember once driving from Salt Lake City to the Flaming Gorge tailwater of the Green River in Utah, on an assignment for Field & Stream. While side-hilling around the Uinta Mountains in a rental car, I drove over a short bridge, noticed out of the corner of

*On an open California spring creek, you'll do as well with a long rod as a short one...until all that brush closes in over the stream, which is when you'll want your 7-footer. Unless you employ a rod caddy to hand you the rod you need for the cast you're about to take, you should carry the short rod and make it work where a long one might be better, if the stream is dominated by sections where a short rod will work but a long one will cause problems.*



my eye that a tiny stream rushed under it. It was time for lunch. I turned around, drove back to the bridge, parked, and eyed that little stream while I munched a deli sandwich. The volume of water didn't amount to much, but it was pretty, and every once in awhile slowed and spread out in a minor plunge pool. These were so crowded by wild rose, willow, and creek dogwood that at first I thought I'd just eat and arc on. Then I remembered that, as usual, I had Skip's rod slipped into a tube with a more appropriate rod for the Green River.

I unsheathed it, strung it, trotted through the forest downstream a few hundred yards, inserted myself into the crowded stream course, and worked my way back upstream to the bridge casting short, setting a Royal Wulff onto those pools, enticing up wild cutts up to fifteen inches long. It was one of the better applications I've found for that constant rod.



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More centrally on the continent, the small limestone streams of the gorgeous Wisconsin *driftless* region, around famous guide Jim Romberg's Fenimore area west of Madison, have lots of obstructions. But they take the form of tall grasses and shrubs growing up behind you and all around you more often than they do limbs and leaves hanging down. On most of them, you'll be better served by a long rod, to loft your backcasts high, than you will a short rod. However, there are some mid-west streams so small, with grass growing so tight to them, that in places it grows over them, forming much narrower tunnels than I'm used to in the northwest. On such streams rods even shorter than seven feet would prove useful.

The greatest advocate of such rods is Dennis Franke, who in my estimation once designed and built the finest fiberglass small-stream rods that I've ever cast, under the name Glastech. He recommends rods as short as five-and-a-half feet on some of his Wisconsin streams...I'm biting my tongue and refraining from naming them, since it seems that anything written about small streams has the potential to damage them if it causes



*Ted Leeson, author of The Habit of Rivers, fishing the sort of Wisconsin stream that has more obstructions growing up behind and on all sides than it does overhead, making a long rod more suitable than a short one.*



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them to get too much attention...but I once watched Dennis demonstrate the use of a fantastic tiny rod on a pinched-in little stream. The rod and the man were both magic.

If you could find and somehow buy one of those short Glastech rods, or even a more standard 7- or 7-1/2-footer built by Dennis, you would own one of the finest fly rods ever built for small streams. They have the magic that is usually found only in bamboo.



*Skip Morris fishing the kind of small stream suited perfectly to his 7-foot 4-weight Small Stream Special.*

I'm not going to get into bamboo, because you can describe the rods and the actions and the feel of them, but it's more or less hit or miss as to how they'll actually cast. One 7-foot 4-weight will be ideal for small streams; another with the same dimensions will be a club; a third will be a noodle. You have to try them, and furthermore, have to try them where you're going to fish them, and beyond even that have to try them with a couple of different lines, and perhaps even have to fish them enough times to get used to them.

I have a 5-strip, 7-foot, 4-weight bamboo rod built for me by the late and lovable Dean Jones. The first time I fished it, I made the mistake of using it on the Deschutes River, which is not precisely a small stream, though it's often described as two small streams, each five feet wide, one on either bank. But I didn't like Dean's rod the first time I fished it. Then I made the mistake of using it on a small stream, but with a 4-weight, weight-forward line. It wasn't heavy enough at

the point to carry brushy flies very well. I have to confess I kept making mistakes with this rod until I finally worked out what it wanted from me, layered over what I wanted from it, and topped off with what the streams wanted from both of us. I now fish it with a double-taper 5-weight line.



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That rod and I sort of got used to each other. I know its action. It knows my casting stroke. The trout boss us both around. We catch quite a few of those trout, and we think we've become graceful together, though nobody else has ever noticed it.

Unlike the graphite Small Stream Special that Skip designed and built for me, which was precisely what I wanted from the first day I fished it, Dean's bamboo rod didn't suit me right out of the rod tube. But they both do now. And that is perhaps the most beneficial description of the perfect small-stream trout rod: It's the one you've used so often, and cast so much, in so many circumstances, that the two of you have become one.

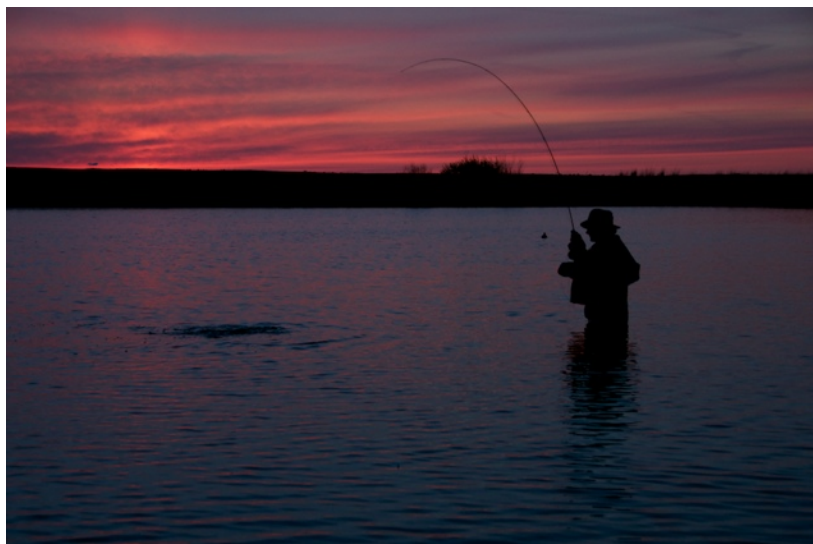
But it ought to be a 7-foot 4-weight, or very near it.

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Dave's book *Trout From Small Streams* is under reconstruction, to be released next year with a full complement of color photographs.

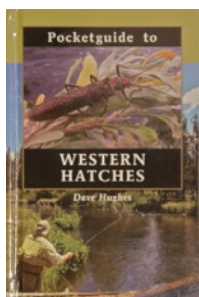
Post-note: I just got my L. L. Bean Fly Fishing catalog in the mail; first thing it lists is a Pocket Water rod at 6' 6" for a 3-weight line, 4-piece with a "smooth, medium action." If I didn't have about twenty small-stream rods in closets, hanging from rafters in the garage, and in the back of the pickup for emergencies, I'd order one and try it out. It also makes me realize that many rods are being built today that would make the perfect small-stream outfit, if one just took time to sort the good ones out from among the noodles and pool cues. That actually would be a fun project; I just might assign it to myself.

Photo by Rick Hafele

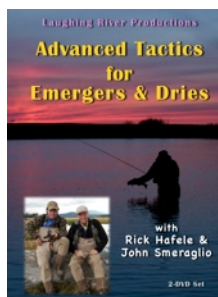


## News from Dave, Rick, & Skip!

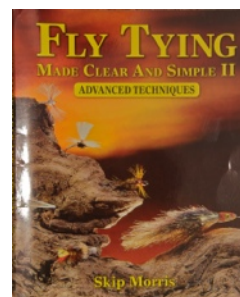
### RECENT BOOK & DVD RELEASES



Dave's newest book, *Pocketguide to Western Hatches*, just out September 2011, is now available.--\$21.95--Stackpole Books, 2011



Rick's newest instructional DVD (2-disc set) with John Smeraglio titled, *Advanced Tactics for Emergers & Dries*, is now available. Order it online at [www.laughingrivers.com](http://www.laughingrivers.com) or get at your local fly shop. \$29.95 - Laughing River Productions, 2011



Skip's latest book, *Fly Tying Made Clear and Simple II, Advanced Techniques*, offers thorough instructions for tying many great patterns for fussy trout. Frank Amato Pub, 2009

To learn more about Dave, Skip, and Rick's latest publications, where they are speaking, or to book them for your own program , go to their personal websites at:

Skip Morris: <http://www.skip-morris-fly-tying.com/>

Rick Hafele: <http://rickhafele.com>

Dave Hughes: <http://dave-hughes-fly-fishing.com/>